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U.S. weighs a major military buildup in Honduras

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WASHINGTON — The United States might furnish high-performance combat aircraft to Honduras and will substantially expand the U.S. military presence in the country — which borders Nicaragua and El Salvador — if current bilateral negotiations succeed, administration and congressional sources say.

The sources say that Washington might double military and economic aid to Honduras, build at least two permanent American military bases there, further enlarge existing bases and conduct another round of massive military maneuvers on Honduran soil.

Congressional sources said the Honduran government has asked the administration for sophisticated combat jets, about \$400 million in increased military and economic assistance, and \$2 million to expand one military base. In exchange, the Hondurans would allow the United States to proceed with the war games and construction of the two other military installations.

Critics of the administration's Central America policies fear that an expansion of military commitments in Honduras might lead to war with Nicaragua, Honduras' neighbor to the south, or to direct involvement in the civil war in El Salvador, to the west.

Two new bases

"With each new exercise, with each new airfield, we raise the risk of an accident or unintentional provocation — one that could involve U.S. personnel in hostilities and be a pretext for commit-

ment of U.S. troops to the region," said one of the critics, Sen. Jim Sasser, D-Tenn. "It's time for Congress to slow down this construction before it results in tragic consequences."

Administration officials said, however, that a U.S. presence in Honduras is vital to American security because it serves as a deterrent against the Sandinista government in Nicaragua and the leftist guerrillas in El Salvador.

The bases in question include one Honduras already operates at Aguacate — at one time used by the Central Intelligence Agency to supply and direct anti-Sandinista Nicaraguan rebels — as well as two new ones: a permanent training center for Honduran and Salvadoran soldiers, and a combined U.S. Navy and Air Force base on Honduras' Caribbean coast capable of housing about 1,000 American troops.

Publicly, the administration did not confirm or deny that any of these issues are being discussed. A Pentagon official said Honduras has not "formally" requested high performance aircraft and that the administration "has no plans" to expand or build any more bases in Honduras or provide that country with increased military aid.

Request submitted

Other administration officials acknowledged privately, however, that the expanded military aid to Honduras is being discussed. Classified documents obtained by The Herald also show that some initiatives, such as construction of the U.S. base on the Caribbean coast, have been approved within the Defense Department.

President Reagan's landslide re-election has cleared the way for the continuation of the negotiations, which began in August when the Honduran government submitted a document to Washington requesting increased military and economic aid.

Since the negotiations began, the Honduran government of President Roberto Suazo Cordova has suspended the training of Salvadoran soldiers in Honduras and has begun distancing itself from U.S. policy in Central America.

Honduran officials said the training of Salvadorans will resume if the current negotiations produce an agreement favorable to Honduras.

One congressional aide who has been briefed extensively by the Pentagon said the Hondurans have asked for about \$400 million including about \$120 million in military funds. Congress approved \$62.5 million in military aid for Honduras in fiscal year 1985, which began Oct. 1.

High-performance jets

While the doubling of military aid to Honduras may meet some opposition in Congress, the issue is not as controversial as the next item on the Honduran agenda: advanced combat aircraft.

One congressional source said Tegucigalpa has asked Washington for F-5s — compact jet fighters widely sold to U.S. allies around the world — to replace its rusting, Israeli-made Super Mysteres. Officials said privately that Washington has not responded to the Honduran request because doing so would be incompatible with the official policy of discour-

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aging neighboring Nicaragua from obtaining its own high-performance planes from the Soviet bloc.

"If we gave high-performance planes to the Hondurans," one administration official said, "then Nicaragua would be justified in getting MiGs from the Soviet

Union."

However, this official said that if Nicaragua ignores U.S. warnings and obtains advanced aircraft then Washington would have "no choice" but to provide Honduras with similar planes.

As for the bases, congressional sources and administration officials said the Honduran and U.S. governments are both interested in enlarging Aguacate, the facility near the Nicaraguan border where the CIA has trained Nicaraguan rebels known as contras.

The Reagan administration would like to continue using the base for contra activities next year if it succeeds in persuading Congress to resume covert aid to the insurgents. In October, Congress suspended that aid until at least Feb. 28.

But Honduran officials have said they no longer want the contras based at Aguacate and instead would like to turn the facility into a base for the advanced aircraft they hope to receive from the United States.

Longer runway

In 1983, the 46th Army Engineering Battalion enlarged Aguacate's existing 4,300-foot-long runway to 8,000 feet and then turned the facility over to the CIA, according to a secret General Accounting Office (GAO) report delivered in March to Rep. William Alexander, D-Ark.

Congressional aides said that originally the Defense Department claimed the expansion was necessary to accommodate C-130 transport aircraft involved in last year's military maneuvers in Honduras. However, aides challenged that

explanation because C-130s only require a 3,500-foot runway to operate. Since then, aides said, the Pentagon has acknowledged that the base can be used for advanced aircraft.

In fact, another GAO report prepared for Alexander in June said that as soon as the runway is paved, the facility will be able to accommodate high-performance aircraft.

Congress, just before adjourning in October, authorized the spending of up to \$45 million in 1985 to build a permanent Regional Military Training Center near Puerto Castilla, on the Honduran Caribbean Coast. The center would be operated by U.S. Special Forces troops who would train Salvadoran and Honduran soldiers.

Congressional sources say the administration also plans to revive plans in 1985 to build a permanent \$160 million Navy-Air Force base at a site near Puerto Castilla.

Fresh maneuvers

Gen. Paul Gorman, chief of U.S. military forces in Central America and head of the Panama-based U.S. Southern Command, originally proposed the project in 1983 and the Pentagon's Defense Resources Board approved it, according to a GAO report.

However, it has not been included in the Pentagon's budget because of concerns that the project would spark more controversy over Reagan's policies in the region.

Pentagon officials acknowledged, however, that they are planning another round of military maneuvers in Honduras for later this year and in early 1985.